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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [KDEM](#) [AF](#) [UK](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: BRITAIN'S COMMITMENT IN AFGHANISTAN REMAINS FIRM
DESPITE RECENT CASUALTIES AND INTENSE SCRUTINY OF WAR EFFORT

REF: LONDON 1628

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Greg Berry
for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C/NF) Summary. HMG remains firmly committed to its mission in Afghanistan despite a spate of intense media coverage of British casualties there and political debate about whether Prime Minister Brown's government has provided a sufficient number of troops on the ground and helicopters in support of the war effort. In the latest of many pointed criticisms of the government, a House of Commons Defense Committee report released July 16 expressed concern that British field commanders are unable to undertake operations because of a shortage of helicopters. Margaret Aldred, a key Cabinet Officer adviser, told the Political Minister Counselor July 15 that PM Brown is personally overseeing Britain's mission in Afghanistan. She defended HMG's prosecution of the war effort, insisting that "increments" of more troops and helicopters would not make a difference to the outcome of combat operations. She said that the center of gravity policy direction has increasingly shifted to the Cabinet Office; HMG's "coordinating cell" for Afghanistan and Pakistan issues is now located in the Cabinet Office. Aldred stressed the importance of continued close coordination between the U.S. and UK in developing and implementing a strategy for after the August presidential elections, recommending a POTUS-PM Brown conversation as part of that process. On a separate topic, Aldred said that the Iraq Committee of Inquiry, for which she will be the Secretary starting in August, would at some point during its mandate travel to Washington for "private" discussions. The Committee will issue its report no sooner than next July, she said. End Summary.

Scrutiny and Debate

12. (SBU) British media continues to carefully scrutinize HMG's prosecution of the war effort in Afghanistan, with Conservative politicians faulting PM Brown for failing to deploy sufficient numbers of British troops and helicopters. General Sir Richard Dannatt, head of the Army, publicly called July 15 for more boots on the ground, which he said were crucial for victory. These critiques have coincided with extensive media coverage of the repatriation and burial of the remains of the fallen soldiers, including the July 16 interment of Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thornloe, the highest ranking British officer killed in action since the Falklands conflict.

13. (SBU) A House of Commons Defense Committee report released July 16 expressed concern that British field commanders are unable to undertake operations because of a shortage of helicopters. The report continues that "we are

also concerned that operational commanders find they have to use ground transport, when helicopter lift would be preferred, both for the outcome and for the protection of our forces." However, the report assesses issues of training and funding and concludes that it would be "unfeasible to surge helicopters into theater."

¶4. (SBU) Prime Minister Brown has firmly defended HMG's prosecution of the war effort. Appearing July 16 before the Commons Liaison Committee, a panel of senior lawmakers, Brown insisted that British troops are "equipped to do the job that we are doing at the moment." Brown insisted July 15 that it was "absolutely clear" that the recent heavy death toll in Afghanistan -- 15 soldiers over a recent 10 day period -- was not due to a shortage of troops or equipment.

Hanging Tough

¶5. (C/NF) Margaret Aldred, Deputy Head, Defense and Overseas Secretariat at the Cabinet Office, told the Political Minister Counselor July 15 that HMG remains committed at the highest levels to maintaining its mission in Afghanistan. She stressed that PM Brown is personally overseeing) and is strongly committed to) Britain,s mission in Afghanistan. Indeed, she continued, the center of gravity policy direction has increasingly shifted to the Cabinet Office, and HMG,s &coordinating cell8 for Afghanistan and Pakistan issues is now located in the Cabinet Office.

¶6. (C/NF) Aldred emphasized that Britain,s strategy in

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Afghanistan reflects a carefully considered analysis of how Britain could best contribute to the allied effort there. Additional &increments8 of British troops and more helicopters would not substantially change the realities on the ground or make a victory in Afghanistan any easier, Aldred insisted. She stressed that HMG has "worked hard to get the right number of helicopters" -- and she praised the PM for "pushing back" when grilled by MPs about the government's handling of the war effort. Referring to General Dannatt's call for more troops, she stated that the PM decided how many British troops would deploy to Afghanistan only after close consultation with the MOD.

¶7. (C/NF) Aldred strongly criticized partisan &party politicking8 which, she asserted, attempted to capitalize on 15 British combat deaths over a recent 10 day period to cast doubt on HMG,s prosecution of the war effort. "Both opposition parties are seizing every opportunity to attack the government," Aldred said. She also faulted Britain,s sensationalistic press for attempting to &find fissures8 among the MOD, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and Cabinet Office. Aldred acknowledged, however, that "15 losses in 10 days is a big issue," which has struck a chord of public emotion. HMG could do a better job of "explaining clearly the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan and terrorism in the UK," she said.

U.S.-UK Coordination -- at the Highest Levels

¶8. (C/NF) Aldred asserted that "key people" need to discuss a "creative way forward" for the period immediately after the August presidential elections. She stated that the U.S. and UK -- and ISAF -- need to agree what to do after the elections in order to assure stability and institutional development since ISAF "does not have a robust, coordinated plan for after the elections." She said that conversations soon between President Obama and PM Brown and between NSA Jones and Simon McDonald, Head of Foreign and Defense Policy at the Cabinet Office, would help sculpt the best post-election strategy.

¶9. (C/NF) Aldred confirmed to the Political Minister Counselor that she would leave the Cabinet Office in early August to start in her new position as Secretary to the Iraq Committee of Inquiry established by PM Brown. Modifying earlier predictions about when the Committee might issue its report (See the July 13 "London Daily Report"), Aldred said the report might come out as late as October 2010, possibly later, and could not come out before the end of July 2010. She said that the Committee would travel to Washington, D.C. for "private" discussions about Iraq. She noted that the Committee would not have subpoena powers in the United States; she promised to coordinate the Committee's planned travel with Embassy London.

"We Knew This Would Be A Difficult Period"

¶10. (C) During a July 16 meeting with selected diplomatic corps members, including from NATO and EU countries, Matthew Lodge, Head of the Afghanistan Group at the FCO, vigorously defended HMG's war effort. Noting an "intense spike" in media and public interest in Afghanistan, in light of recent casualties, Lodge stressed that "we should not be surprised that more combat leads to more deaths." He underscored that, given ongoing intense combat operations, "we knew this would be a difficult period." An MOD officer at the briefing echoed this point, adding that merely using more helicopters would not make it easier to interact with the Afghan population.

¶11. (C/NF) In a separate meeting later the same day with Poloff, Lodge characterized the current discussion about helicopters and boots on the ground as part of a "recurring" political debate. He insisted that most MPs continue to support the UK's war effort, even if some were attacking PM Brown for partisan political reasons. He criticized "mischievous" reporting in the British press, citing July 16 newspaper reports that alleged General Dannatt had been "forced" to fly in a U.S. Blackhawk helicopter during a recent trip to Afghanistan because a British helicopter was not available. Lodge noted that the FCO's Afghanistan Strategy Team would join the Cabinet Office's "coordinating cell" in early August.

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Comment

¶12. (C/NF) FCO's Matthew Lodge correctly characterizes the debate about helicopters and troops levels as a "recurring" debate insofar as questions of equipment and troop levels are not new issues but have been raised before, both within the MOD and by the government's political foes. The real risk of the current debate, however, is that extensive media coverage of recent casualties coupled with ongoing partisan sniping at the government's handling of the war effort could combine to undermine already tepid public support of Britain's war effort. According to recent polling, 47 percent of the British public oppose the war and 46 percent support it. (Reftel) The level of opposition could rise, however, if the press continues to juxtapose images of flag-draped coffins with angry debates about whether Britain's war effort is being properly handled. End Comment.

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